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ABSTRACT

Previously faced with the problem of curriculum reform, elementary and secondary schools now must deal with the deeper social problems of poverty, racial discrimination, sexism, and relevance. Since the survival of many schools hinges on their adaptability, they will require procedures for studying ways of responding to change and of evaluating proposals for action. Yet, many pressures bear on the school systems, making reform a slow process. This report analyzes characteristics that make an organization flexible or capable of coping with change and suggests some elements that might be used in fashioning a strategy for dealing with change in schools. While stressing the importance of the school culture as a determinant of school conditions, the report offers suggestions for strengthening or improving the culture through collective action by teachers and principals and through a conscious plan for dealing with change in the school. (Author/LAA)

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THE CLIMATE FOR CHANGE:

FACTORS THAT FOSTER ADAPTABILITY WITHIN THE SCHOOL

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The Setting

Introduction

Curriculum reform had begun to lose its aura of importance and urgency in the early 1970's. To be sure, curriculum reform is still credited with improving school programs, and the need for new and revised curricula is widely recognized. But, the social crisis engulfing our society has altered the context within which curriculum reform is viewed and evaluated. "Survival manuals" are taking the place of "curriculum project manuals" as guidelines for educational reform. The process of promoting curriculum reform is typically viewed as including three elements: (1) locating or developing a promising new idea; (2) obtaining funds to carry it out; and (3) convincing the staff that the innovation has value. This may reflect some of the consideration in curriculum reform -- but is not adequate as a model for more basic changes, i.e., awareness of other people's ideas, not necessity, may be the mother of invention, as Thorndike claims. Yet in education, mere awareness of other's ideas seldom results in much change or innovation. Nor is initial acceptance or enthusiasm enough to ensure implementation.

The recognition of the complexity of the educational process and the increasing pressure for changes have sparked numerous projects and studies seeking to identify not only the obstacles, but also the key elements in the change process.

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Among the aspects of this process receiving increasing attention are organizational structure and climate. To put it as a question, what are the characteristics that make an organization flexible or capable of coping with change? This paper seeks to: (1) set a context for considering this question; (2) cite some of the characteristics that go with flexibility in organizations; and (3) suggest some of the elements that might be used in fashioning a plan or strategy for dealing with change in schools.

During the last fifteen years, American elementary and secondary schools have been continuously bombarded with demands, many worthwhile, all urgent and most requiring instant attention. Since the late 1950's, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik I, and the training of mathematicians and scientists became a top national priority, there has been a new crisis every few years. Poverty, racial discrimination, sexism and relevance are among the issues raised. Some critics have even advocated "de-schooling" society. In each case, the schools were singled out for attention, both as contributors to the sorry conditions prevailing and also as necessary vehicles for the solutions. It is no wonder, under these circumstances, that educators appear gun-shy as they await the next salvo. It is also apparent that in an era of rapid social change in which many institutions are under attack -- including our schools and even our moral values -- survival of many school systems hinges on their adaptability. Schools are no longer closed systems, impervious to societal forces or immune from attack. Increasingly, schools are being called upon to achieve a precarious balance between the world outside the school -- the surrounding community with its various political-social units, pressure groups and special

interests -- and the student body. It is increasingly apparent that flexibility, adaptability and a capacity to cope with change are among the essential characteristics which contemporary school systems need to survive.

My task is to identify some of the factors that foster adaptability within the school. Or to put it in the form of a question, how can schools identify those factors and increase their capacity or ability to cope with change? The context within which this question or the issues involved might be framed includes elements such as: (1) technology is transforming the very fabric of our lives; (2) this is the first generation which believes Earth is destructible and resources limited; and (3) expanding communication -- this is the first generation where people throughout the world can see and hear one another. These along with urbanization, rapid mobility, sharing of cultures, national disunity and racial tensions are challenging people to look beyond their own immediate concerns into a world where there is poverty, injustice, inequity and terror. The school is affected by each of these changes.

In today's schools, therefore, change and response to it must be viewed as a conscious part of regularly operating procedures (a healthy element to be used constructively). A conscious awareness of the effects of social change and a means for assessing the significance of change have become necessities. This means that schools require procedures and mechanisms for studying alternative ways of responding to change and evaluating proposals for action on the basis of their merit, urgency, impact, and contribution to society.

The dilemma facing education is profound. On one hand, the educational system is often exhorted by the intellectual community, social critics and certain influential writers to recognize and seek solutions to whatever vexing social problems happen to stir their passion. On the other hand, studies consistently indicate that most parents and the public at large expect the schools to exercise effective social control. Most of the public sees the schools as instruments of conservatism, as institutions that preserve traditions and induct the young into certain conventional values. Hence, two antithetical demands are being made of the schools: that they prepare students for an unpredictable future and that they preserve and transmit the traditions of the past.

Regardless of how desirable reforms might be, schools are generally not able to change as rapidly as most critics wish, nor are they as flexible and as pliable as many believe. Moreover, there is little agreement among educators regarding the amount and the nature of changes needed, or on the speed with which they should occur. And with over two million teachers employed by more than seventeen thousand separate governing units, the new priorities announced frequently in Washington or in state capitals, even when supported by USOE and the foundations, seldom alter practice quickly.

Perhaps a more accurate view than the one usually reflected in the popular press would show a steady but slow improvement in the schools over the last fifteen years. Certainly, the variety and quality of instructional materials has improved. Audio-visual materials are better designed. New buildings are often more imaginative and inviting. Teachers in general are more skilled. While there have probably been few breakthroughs, and perhaps even some backsliding here and there, overall some progress has been made.

Too slow for the reformers, too fast for the traditionalists -- but change has occurred. Given the size of the system, and recognizing that it is highly decentralized and subject to a great variety of influences and pressures, it is little wonder that it exhibits considerable inertia.

Change is Complicated

While a plan for dealing with change seems essential, it is also necessary within such a framework to look more carefully at the individual and organizational elements, the human factors. Each of us sees the need for change or the problems and issues involved somewhat differently. There is the story of the two old gentlemen in their 90's being interviewed by the young reporter. To the first, the reporter said, "You have lived a long time, you must have seen a lot of changes in your life," to which the old gentleman replied, "Yeah, and I was 'agin' every one of them." To the second gentleman he said, "To what do you attribute your old age?" to which he replied, "I never wasted energy resisting temptation or change." As with these gentlemen, our views of life, the positions we hold, the tasks we perform, our career goals and our personalities all play a part in how we preceive and react to change. It is probably fair to say, however, that most individuals feel more comfortable continuing an established routine or pursuing familiar methods of instruction or control than they do in experimenting with new methods or breaking established patterns.

Like individuals, most organizations also tend to resist change, and the schools are no exception. They have their decision makers, their established rules, norms, ideologies, rewards and organizational structure. The way new jobs are defined and assigned, the way rules and procedures

are formulated and enforced, the way the budget is allocated: all can be obstacles to change. Moreover, affecting the schools' willingness and ability to change is a wide range of other factors such as their ties to colleges and universities, accrediting agencies, testing groups, producers of instructional material and hardware, their contact or lack of it with community groups and agencies, the nature of the evaluation programs they use, the clearness and consistency of goals and objectives, and patterns of communication among teachers and between administrators and teachers. A listing of these factors reveals how complicated the matter of change in the schools can be. Furthermore, basic, structural changes are costly in both personal and organizational terms. The uncertainty of the benefits of changing teachers' roles or decision-making mechanisms and the certainty of resistance means that demands for change are often channeled into safer areas like spending more money on existing programs or adopting fads that are not seen as threatening to organized groups within or outside the school. Enthusiastically heralded, bold new programs often become more of the same.

Yet the fact remains that old patterns and practices are being successfully challenged in many school systems around the country. Students, teachers and parents, as well as innovative administrators, are using an arsenal of tactics ranging from persuasion to confrontation, and from bargaining to political agitation, strikes, petitioning and law suits. New knowledge, technological innovation, higher taxes, decentralization, changing occupational patterns, disgruntled parents, dissatisfied students, teacher militancy and crisis-oriented legislatures all have increased the demand for faster adoption of new ideas and practices. Is there some approach to educational change that might be less chaotic and convulsive

than merely resisting until the dam bursts or, on the other hand, reacting too quickly to the rash of fads and gimmicks and leaving the best ideas and practices trampled under the stampede?

Elements Supporting Flexibility

Students of planned change have identified a number of factors that are generally conducive to a climate for change in organizations. They include: (1) easy and free-flowing lines of communication between and among individuals and units in the system; (2) support for risk-taking from administration and peers; (3) high staff morale; (4) involvement in professional activities; and (5) access to various information networks. Openness to change in the schools may also stem from such factors as decentralization of authority, existence of mechanisms for self-renewal, the absence of strong vested interests in the status quo, skills at problem solving, individual and collective ability to exert influence on other decision makers, general environment for learning, the extent of trust and sharing, and autonomy -- that is, not being excessively dependent on public opinion.

All of which indicates that creating a climate for change in complex social organizations like schools requires careful scrutiny of a variety of factors and processes. If changes are to take place, the routine must be made visible. Faculty members cannot allow themselves to accept what happens in schools as normal, natural and therefore inevitable. Both teachers and administrators need to pay more attention to what people actually do, not simply what people say they do or what they claim needs to be done. Data must be collected and interpreted, and these interpretations

acted upon. For example, how much and what kind of communication or exchange takes place between teachers and students before and after a change is made? How many of the memos or messages received by teachers from administrators require thought or input on the part of the teacher, such as asking for opinions or recommendations? Are there procedures or occasions for listening to students? Or is the situation like the one Paul Simon depicts in "The Sound of Silence": "people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening . . ."? Greater awareness of the patterns of behavior and routines inside and outside the school can help us determine what is changeable and what cannot be changed.

Schools are institutions with sets of rules that regularize behavior and activities within them. To understand schools, one needs to learn to observe the regularities, the interactions, how they actually function. Educators must learn to see their school environment accurately before they can hope to alter it. "Whoever it was discovered water," in the words of Marshall McLuhan, "you can be sure it wasn't a fish." The only way of influencing an organization you don't control is to understand it well enough to know where it is most vulnerable to your kind of influence.

School Culture as a Focus

It is ironic that while we have long accepted what happens to students as the ultimate criterion for judging school programs, the general context of schooling, which seems to have a great deal to do with what happens to students, has remained basically unchanged despite many program experiments and other innovations. We constantly tinker when what is needed is a basic examination and restructuring of the school organization.

Efforts to effect some desired change or raise the level of student abilities in certain areas (e.g., work habits, ability to generalize or citizenship skills) are certainly very important. But insofar as they fail to take into account other basic factors, such as the culture or infrastructure of the school, they are insufficient.

A healthy, productive school culture may be as important to the educational process as any of our efforts, however successful, to define specific behavioral objectives and develop strategies for accomplishing them. The healthy functioning of the school system, according to Goodlad,[1] is closely tied to the social and political structure of the school: the locus of decision-making authority and responsibility, the relations between principal and teachers and between teachers and students, and the processes of human interaction that take place.

If healthy organizations can be likened to healthy individuals in terms of their capacity to cope with, adjust to or control their environment, it then becomes possible to suggest some attributes or processes that might help increase an institution's responsiveness to change. Healthy organizations generally exhibit the following qualities:[2] (1) Their goals and objectives are widely shared and there is an obvious effort to meet those objectives. (2) People feel free to discuss difficulties or problems, can expect them to be dealt with, and are optimistic that these problems can be solved. (3) In attacking problems, people work informally, are not preoccupied with status and second-guessing about what the boss will say, and

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[1]Goodlad, John, "Staff Development: The League Model," Theory Into Practice, Vol. XI, No. 4 (October, 1972) p. 208.

[2]Adopted from, Jack Findyce and Raymond Weil, Managing With People, Addison Wesley, 1971, pp. 11-14.

tolerate a great deal of non-conforming behavior. (4) In making decisions involving other people, the individual's level in the hierarchy is seldom considered as important a factor as ability, sense of responsibility, work load and requirements for professional development. (5) There is a sense of team play in planning and performing, and the judgment of people in different levels of the organization is respected. (6) The range of problems discussed or dealt with includes personal needs and human relations. (7) Collaboration is expected; people request help readily and are willing to give help in return, and ways of helping one another are highly developed. (8) Competition between individuals and groups is fair and in the direction of generally accepted goals. (9) When there is a crisis, people band together and work on it until the crisis is resolved. (10) Conflicts are considered important to decision making and personal goals: people say what they want and expect others to do the same. (11) There is a great deal of on-the-job learning based on a willingness to give, seek and use feedback. (12) Leadership is flexible, shifting in style and passes from person to person to suit the situation. (13) Risk is accepted as a condition of growth and change, and individuals are ready to learn from each mistake. (14) Organizational structure and procedures are fashioned to help people get the job done; they are also readily changed. (15) There is a sense of order and stability which does not prevent a high rate of innovation: old methods are questioned and often give way, and the organization adapts swiftly to opportunities and tends to anticipate the future.

Viewed as a description of any known organization, these characteristics may appear idealistic. Perhaps they might best be viewed as a statement of direction. But given the formidable constraints under which the system

operates, can the schools actually move in such a direction? What chance is there for establishing a climate favorable to change within the educational system?

Since the constraints in the system are real, formidable and unlikely to disappear, we might better concentrate our attention on bending the system rather than either attacking or ignoring it. Often this simply means using elements or occasions already within the system in a more constructive way, i.e., textbook selection, in-service days. The school principal may be the pivotal figure in this process. The principal is generally seen as a major force in determining the effectiveness of a school's educational program. A considerable body of research, however, indicates that the school and the school district exercise a persuasive and powerful influence over the principal's behavior. Compliance, that is, the process whereby the principal's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are brought into line with what the school expects, appears to be a major component of the administrative role. The principal often walks the tightrope between the image the school holds before him and what he perceives as necessary to accomplish needed changes. This is especially true as the belief grows that schools should adopt a more dynamic posture -- one associated more with search and discovery or trial and error than with predictability. The principal, the "crucial implementor of change," as Sarason[3] Calls him, is often caught between the demand for change and the expectation that he or she will maintain existing relationships. The distracting nature of these pressures is often such that the principal

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[3]Sarason, Seymour B., The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change, Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, 1971.

simply overlooks the potential of the existing staff and resources. We might to well to paraphrase Pogo's remark from "We have met the enemy and he is us" to "We have met the expert and he is us." The greatest untapped resource in many schools is the staff.

Once we recognize the culture of the school as an important determinant of what happens to students, then we can focus attention on the factors that might improve or strengthen this culture. To be healthy, the school culture must be sensitive to those within it and attuned to the conditions and events surrounding it. The school, with its principal, teachers, students and, to a lesser extent, parents and citizens, constitutes the organic unit for dealing with educational change. Collective action on the part of these parties defines the school's mission. The principal and teachers together form a group central to the change process.

This being the case, a key element in fostering the school's adaptability and thereby improving its capacity to change involves providing ample growth opportunities for this catalytic group of principals and teachers. What this might mean, when translated into programs, is enabling this group to:

1) Review, speculate about the experiment with innovative educational ideas and practices.
2) Acquire skills related both to experimental efforts and to group maintenance.
3) Practice problem solving on real issues in their schools.
4) Observe successful programs and practices in other schools.

What basic changes do such programs require? Reallocation of time, our chief resource, seems crucial, as does development of norms and rewards supportive of new roles and relationships for teachers and administrators.

Needed: A Plan to Cope with Change

Designing a program to cope with change should place the school in a dynamic relationship to change. Rather than trying futily to stop social change, schools should concentrate on being able to manage some of their own responses to change through awareness, assessment of importance and evaluation.

The choices confronting a school using such procedures include: (1) Rejecting the proposed change outright. Such action, when based on conscious choice, careful study and agreed-upon priorities, is likely to be respected even if not agreed with. (2) Recognizing the change as something that is occurring outside the school, but deciding to do nothing about it in the school program. For example, while recognizing that sex mores are changing, a school may decide not to offer a program in sex education. (3) Dealing with the change as part of the regular school program; for instance, offering Black studies or a unit on Vietnam in social studies classes. (4) Encouraging the faculty to seek out and implement innovations such as future studies, computerized instruction or changing the length of the school day. Remembering Polonius' advice in Hamlet to "be not the last on whom the new is tried," such a school seeks to be among the first on whom the new is tried. (5) Accepting change as inevitable and setting up mechanisms for continually assessing how best to respond to it. Such a school generally develops a plan or procedures for dealing with change.

There may be many other choices as well as many other ways of viewing change. The point here is that what is needed is a conscious plan, based on study, that will provide an established procedure for dealing with change in the school.

Identifying the characteristics of flexible organizations and suggesting some of the elements that might go into establishing procedures for dealing with change is an important first step.

Accepting the inevitability of change and being convinced that the waiting game cannot be played indefinitely leads one to a "damned if I do and damned if I don't" situation. The hope is that enough of us will have the courage to do, damnation not withstanding. Progress means taking risks. In the words of that noted philosopher Pogo, "we are confronted with insurmountable opportunities."